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A Life and Death Dilemma

When thinking about death, what comes to mind? Joy, fear, uncertainty, caution; numerous connotations hinge upon the concept of death and what comes afterwards. Helen Wickes uses this uncertainty to create an afterlife that shows death, not as the next stage, but a total transformation. In her version of what might be waiting on the other side, “In This Afterlife” describes an ambiguous personal response to death. On one hand, a profound peace that is “unattainable in life” (5-6) envelopes the deceased when the soul is finally at rest and unburdened. However, by gaining a calm contentedness, all the connections and emotions that define humanity are lost. Regardless, death is final, and the transformation cannot be undone. Through a gradual shift from a positive to a negative tone and strong emotional appeals, Wickes unfolds this dichotomy of joy and sorrow that accompanies a reunion with deceased loved ones, depicting that there is an essential aspect to humanity that is lost in death: relationships.

Wickes begins the emotional appeals from the start of the passage through the use of second-person voice: “not exactly / as you remember them” (2-3). The reader then becomes the central character of the passage instead of the speaker, eliciting an immediate personal investment as the reader is forced to assume her loved ones are the scene’s other characters. As well, by narrating the reader’s experience, the speaker guides the reader through a discovery using a shift in tone. Beginning the poem is a positive image of the deceased loved ones. They are described as “somehow / better – at ease – having arrived at the essential / comfort they long for” (3-5). These ethereal beings are painted as improved versions of the ones the reader loved:

“they have each become / what you hoped for” (9-10). Because of the peace they’ve attained, death is initially portrayed as an improvement to life – not exactly a positive experience, but one that has clear benefits. In line six, the word “stripped” is used to describe the loved ones’ loss of life, implying a painful and permanent process, though there’s an ambiguity about whether or not this process is positive or negative. What is stripped away – meaning life – is described as “kaleidoscopic” (7), suggesting an overwhelming sensory experience but also beauty and intricacy, as life is both beautiful and overwhelming. While the stripping away rids the characters of the overwhelming aspect of life – an obvious benefit – it also removes the beauty.

This ambiguity leads into the key transition towards a more negative tone in line thirteen; the speaker uses “but” and begins detailing the qualities no longer present in these entities that used to be loved ones. The speaker describes these beings as having blank faces, saying there is “an endless calm, where once there was boredom / or rage, adoration or bemusement” (14-15). These emotional attachments, indeed emotion in general, were aspects of the “kaleidoscopic existence” (7) that was “stripped” (6) away. While humans are naturally social creatures that rely on interaction with one another, these deceased have been made content in themselves alone. They have no need for dependency and no capacity to mourn what has been lost to them. “Sorrow” (16) and “hunger” (17) are strongly connotative words used to convey the deep impact of this loss; an intense grief over forfeited desires for another’s company.

The objective correlatives used towards the end of the poem clearly depict this “sorrow” (16) and are particularly effective emotional appeals as well. Each relates to common familial interactions the reader undoubtedly has personal experience with: “their old hunger for you / to say something funny, sit for another hour, / and feed their slavering dogs” (17-19). These scenarios are classic in life, such as a grandparent imploring a grandchild to “sit for another hour” and visit more, or a mother shouting up the hall for someone to feed the dogs that are

begging incessantly at her feet. The reader recalls one of these endearing experiences, and then reads in the next line: “that’s all gone now, and there / isn’t a thing you can offer them” (19-20). An emotional connection is established and quickly destroyed, making that “sorrow” (16) more apparently concrete. Wickes further emphasizes the finality of death, of this deconstruction of loved ones, through these similar statements: “none of this matters” (16), “there / isn’t a thing you can offer them” (19-20), and “nothing / you can take back with you” (20-21). When “stripped” (6) of life, there is no regaining what was taken. The reader can easily imagine the relationships she has with loved ones being obliterated, lost for eternity, and the ache that develops from thinking about this loss asserts that relationships are a fundamental aspect of humanity.

By depicting this reunion with loved ones, and the discovery that they are no longer the same people in the afterlife, the poem creates a haunting image of what death does to personality and human essence. In death, these entities have lost aspects that were essential to their character: interdependency, emotional potential, and a desire for relationships. Having emotions is crucial to making relationships, good or bad, and the connections we make stem from a necessity to depend on one another. The reader experiences what at first is joy for her loved ones, for the “essential / comfort” (4-5) they have achieved that life did not offer them, and for their transformation into “a simple presence” (8). It seems well-deserved that these people finally have peace – after all, the reader wants what is best for her loved ones – but the key in that phrase is “simple”. Humanity is complex. To be human is to constantly have choices and conflicts and sparring emotions, while in this afterlife there is merely existence and being content in that. Without those emotional connections, we cease to be a personality all together; we cease to be human. Once the central character realizes these depressing truths, the dichotomy is created: joy for the loved ones that have attained a perfect peace yet sorrow that they no longer

seem to be the people they used to be. Despite this ambiguity, it is clear that relationships are a vital aspect of humanity, since the “sorrow” (16) is created because of their loss.

Relationships and emotions define people’s lives; their loves, their hates, and everything in between. As portrayed in this poem, life can be overwhelming and complicated and very uncomfortable, but there is a profound fulfillment in relationships. As Helen Wickes describes it, the balance shifts in death; a simple existence and peace takes the place that emotional connections used to occupy. The transformation death creates is actually a deconstruction of humanity. In death, there is mute peace, while in life, there is vibrant experience. Let us then enjoy life while it is ours, and the people around us while we can, because in this afterlife, there is no returning to the terrible privilege that is living.

Work Cited

Wickes, Helen. "In This Afterlife." *Poetry Daily*, 17 Apr. 2015. Web. 31 Aug. 2015.

<<http://poems.com/poem.php?date=16543>>.